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MEDIEVAL NEAR EASTERN CERAMICS

Cover: polychrome-painted goblet with the story of Bizhan Manizhe in black, dark red, dark and grayish blue, green, purplish brown, and tan on white glaze. Iran, early 13th century. H. 4¾ in. (28.2)

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MEDIEVAL NEAR EASTERN CERAMICS

IN THE

FREER GALLERY OF ART

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Freer Gallery of Art
Washington, D. C.

FOREWORD

This is a picture book with a short but informative introduction by our Curator of Near Eastern Art, Dr. Richard Ettinghausen.

The Near Eastern collection has been almost entirely built up since the Gallery was opened in 1923. The founder, the late Charles Lang Freer, had very few examples of this sort in his collection. Only four of the pieces shown in this book were in the original Freer collection. There also is quite a collection of Raqqa pottery which is not of outstanding quality. Since the opening of the Gallery, the collection has been built up on the basis of quality alone and has become one of the most outstanding of its type in the world. Thus, there has been no attempt to make a complete series. One must realize that almost all pieces of Near Eastern pottery have been broken and restored.

We are indebted to Mr. Frank Dobias of the Smithsonian's Editorial and Publications Division for designing this catalog and to Mr. Raymond A. Schwartz of our staff for the excellent photography.

A. G. Wenley,
Director.

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If one were to designate the keynote of Near Eastern pottery executed in the immense area between Egypt and Central Asia, he could point to its preference for fine and appropriate designs in the most appealing colors. It is true that Chinese potters achieved nobler shapes and more perfect bodies and glazes, but in the features which formed the real challenge to the Muslim craftsman and to which he devoted his best efforts, the decorative aspects of his pieces, he remained supreme. Indeed, he was so successful in his pursuit of beauty that we are usually little aware, at first, of the shape to which the design has been applied, even if that shape happens to be a very happy one.

In evaluating this achievement, several points should be considered. At the start, the medieval Near Eastern potter had no very noble tradition to follow. The craft as such had, of course, existed for millennia. But the vessels produced in the first centuries of our era had been crudely shaped, or they were clumsy imitations of finer metal forms, while the green or blue glazes had little esthetic appeal. On the whole, potterymaking in the period immediately preceding the rise of Islam did not reach any high level, either socially or artistically. Then, in the 8th and 9th centuries, technical and decorative influences from China provided the necessary stimulus during the critical gestation period; similar influences from the same quarter were felt in the time of the greatest efflorescence of the craft, in the 12th century, and again after the Mongol conquest in the middle of the 13th century. There were also some early Hellenistic-Roman influences, and, at times, some from the Sasanian-Persian world. But even so, the medieval achievement bears on the whole little evidence of these influences, but rather shows a definite and original character of its own.

This character is to a large extent shaped by three factors. First, potterymaking receives a new emphasis. In pre-Islamic Syria and Iran the work of the goldsmiths and silversmiths had been among the finest and most representative of the arts of the time, having been

ordered by the courts and churches. In the divine service of Islam there was no need for such sumptuary works, and only a few important shrines were decorated with gold and silver lamps, candlesticks, or doors. As for the use of such objects by individual persons, had not a tradition pertaining to the Prophet stated, "He who drinks from gold and silver vessels drinks the fire of hell"? This theological opposition to luxury led quite naturally to the use of clay as a humbler and therefore nonobjectionable substitute. This new interest in the once neglected medium was enough to free the way for a flowering of the craft, the products of which were now fully accepted. Indeed, one of the earliest pottery types (illustrated in fig. 1) was discovered in the palaces of the 'Abbasid Caliphs in their 9th-century capital Samarra, while the inscriptions on a luster plate and a polychrome bowl of the late 12th or early 13th centuries indicate that they were executed for Iranian princes (figs. 24 and 31). The artisans themselves remained, however, in a comparatively low social status; yet from the 9th century on they proudly signed their pieces, even in the most conspicuous places.

A second factor in shaping the character of medieval Muslim pottery is the wide geographical distribution of certain types and the potential mobility of the craftsmen. As we can see from the diversity of places where pottery has been found, ceramic wares were shipped to distant towns and countries. Also, the potters were often itinerant, either because they hoped to find more profitable work elsewhere, or because of changed political or economic conditions which necessitated their migration. Even though families or local guilds tried to keep trade secrets, this mobile condition led to cross-fertilization and thus caused certain styles and techniques to become widespread. Although we usually know where certain major pottery types were originally developed, it is often impossible to attribute particular wares to a specific locality, especially since so very few sites have been scientifically excavated, and pieces which provide us with historical data are rare.

A third point to be taken into account is the purely secular nature of Near Eastern pottery. In this respect it differs from its cousin, tilework, which was used extensively on the inside and outside surfaces of mosques and was therefore limited in its ornamental schemes. No such restrictions hampered the decorator of ceramic vessels, and from the late 12th century on, by which time the potter had mastered all technical problems, he could give full rein to his imagination and artistic skill. The designs on pottery are therefore quite free as to choice of subject, the portrayal of movement or of realistic detail. Inscriptions, formal designs of a geometric or floral nature, animals, singly or in groups, scenes of daily life, and courtly subjects, make up in a variety of renditions the subjects of the decoration. Mere illustrations of episodes from the secular literature appear only rarely, however, as they seemed inappropriate. An exception, and one that has been skillfully handled, is a beaker with scenes from the story of Bizhan and Manizhe, which, thanks to the indestructibility of clay, presents the oldest consecutive rendition of a *Shah-name* theme (figures on cover).

The fact that the craftsman working in pottery had only a limited area available means that repetitive designs, so often the bane of other media, are not a problem here. Indeed, every motif, much as it may have been used on other pieces of the same time, has an original touch, as if it had been created especially for this very pot and adapted appropriately to its particular shape and curvatures. It is this quality which gives to Near Eastern pottery in its mature periods such a direct, vital, and spirited look. This abandon to the secular spirit is particularly apparent in the luster-decorated and polychrome-painted vessels of the 12th and 13th centuries (figs. 21-26 and 28-35). One of the most ambitious pieces from that period in this picture book depicts a groom sleeping at a pool with a water sprite among the fishes (fig. 24). Yet the designer of this royal piece, in which a courtly subject is combined with folkloristic beliefs, was a *sayyid*, a descendant of the prophet, and thereby, so to speak, a mem-

ber of the religious aristocracy. Even when there is a more Islamic treatment, for example when the decoration is limited to a calligraphically written Arabic inscription, the human, everyday touch still prevails. These texts are not spiritually encumbered by rendering holy texts or sacred thoughts, but instead contain proverbs or adages such as might be given by a father to his son. The inscription on a large 10th-century bowl, for instance, reads: "He who is content with his own opinion runs into danger" (fig. 6).

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that we find in these pieces a concern only with concrete forms or the physical world. The Near Eastern potters actually have evolved, if not invented, a technique which plays with evanescent, immaterial appearances, the technique of luster painting. Already on the very earliest piece of our series it occurs as a surface coating (fig. 1). Luster is thereafter used again and again in various countries and in many different fashions, but in this later, developed form it is employed as a pigment to render optically elusive designs (figs. 2-3, 10-11, 21-22, and 24-26). In the successful quest to imitate Chinese wares we can observe yet another victory over matter. The Near Eastern connoisseur admired the translucency of Far Eastern porcelains and not the ring that they produced when struck, which appealed to the Chinese. However, this quality was unobtainable with the raw materials available in the Near East. In order to achieve the desired effect in spite of this handicap, the Muslim potter conceived the idea of cutting away part of the background around a design, and then covering the holes with glaze (figs. 12 and 15). Through this transfiguration of heavy matter, the desired light-bodied translucency became a reality.

No ancient comment seems to be preserved about the reactions that these splendid pieces provoked when first shown to their owners. Yet such sentiments are not entirely lost. Some vessels and tiles bear inscriptions which express the various moods associated with them. A few reflect the spirit of Omar Khayyam, with his glorification of

the fleeting moment and his advice to enjoy wine and other worldly pleasures. There are also other thoughts. Some inscriptions (as on fig. 24) wish to convey happiness to the user, the same happiness which to us seems perfectly captured in so many of these pieces:

> May your wealth and glory be always increasing,
> May your fortune surpass all limits,
> So that whatever reaches your palate from this plate,
> Will increase your soul, O master of the world.

Or this concern for happiness may simply be rendered as "blessing to the owner" (fig. 6)—a commonplace formula, yet enobled by the hand of the calligrapher:

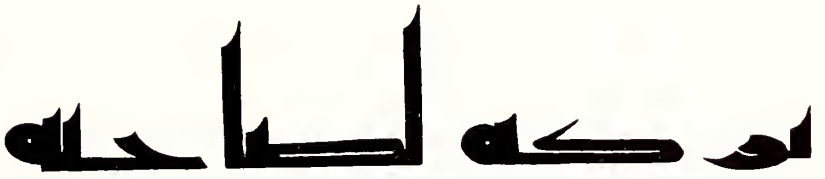

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Figure 1. Flat platter imitating metalwork, with gold-lustered glaze stained with green spots. Iraq, early 9th century. D. 11 in. (57.23)

Figure 2. White-glazed jar with monochrome gold luster painting. Found in Iran. Iraq, 10th century. H. 11⅛ in. (53.90)

Figure 3. Another view of the jar shown in figure 2. (53.90)

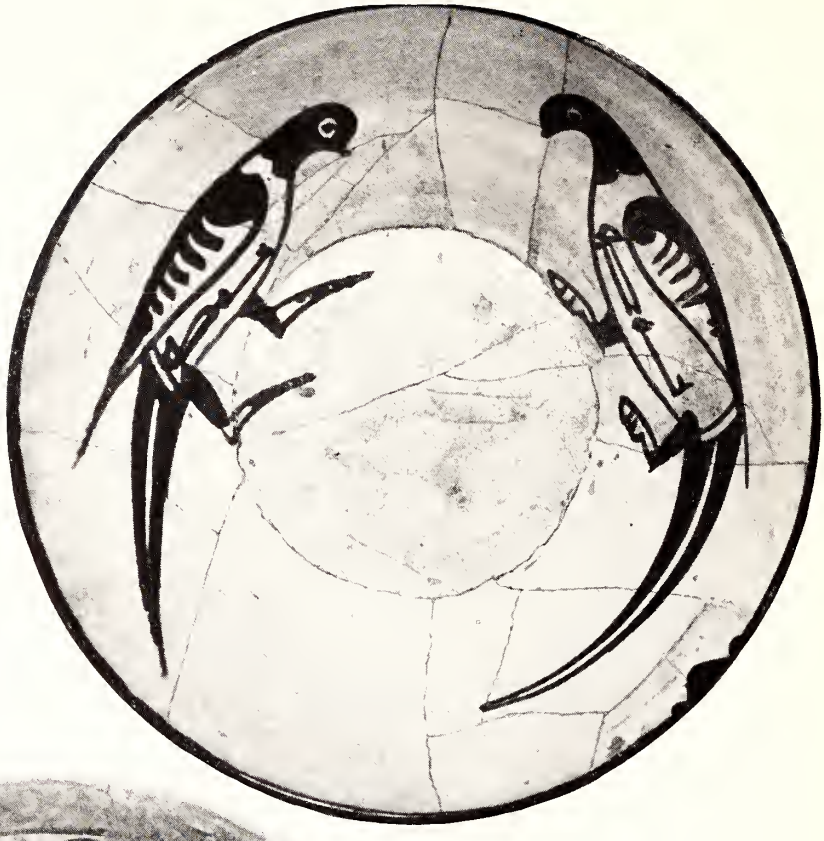


Figure 4. Deep bowl with brownish-black slip painting on white. Found in Nishapur. Transoxania or Eastern Iran, 10th century. D. 8 9/16 in. (56.1)

Figure 5. Deep bowl with purplish-black, yellow, and green painting on white. Iran (Nishapur), 10th century. D. 10 9/16 in. (59.16)

Figures 6 and 7. Deep bowl painted with brownish-black and brick-red slips on white with green spots. "Afrasiyab ware," found in Nishapur. Transoxania or Eastern Iran, 10th century. D. 15 9/16 in. (57.24)

Figure 8. Platter painted with brownish-black slip on white. "Afrasiyab ware," found in Nishapur. Transoxania or Eastern Iran, 10th century. D. 18 1/16 in. (52.11)

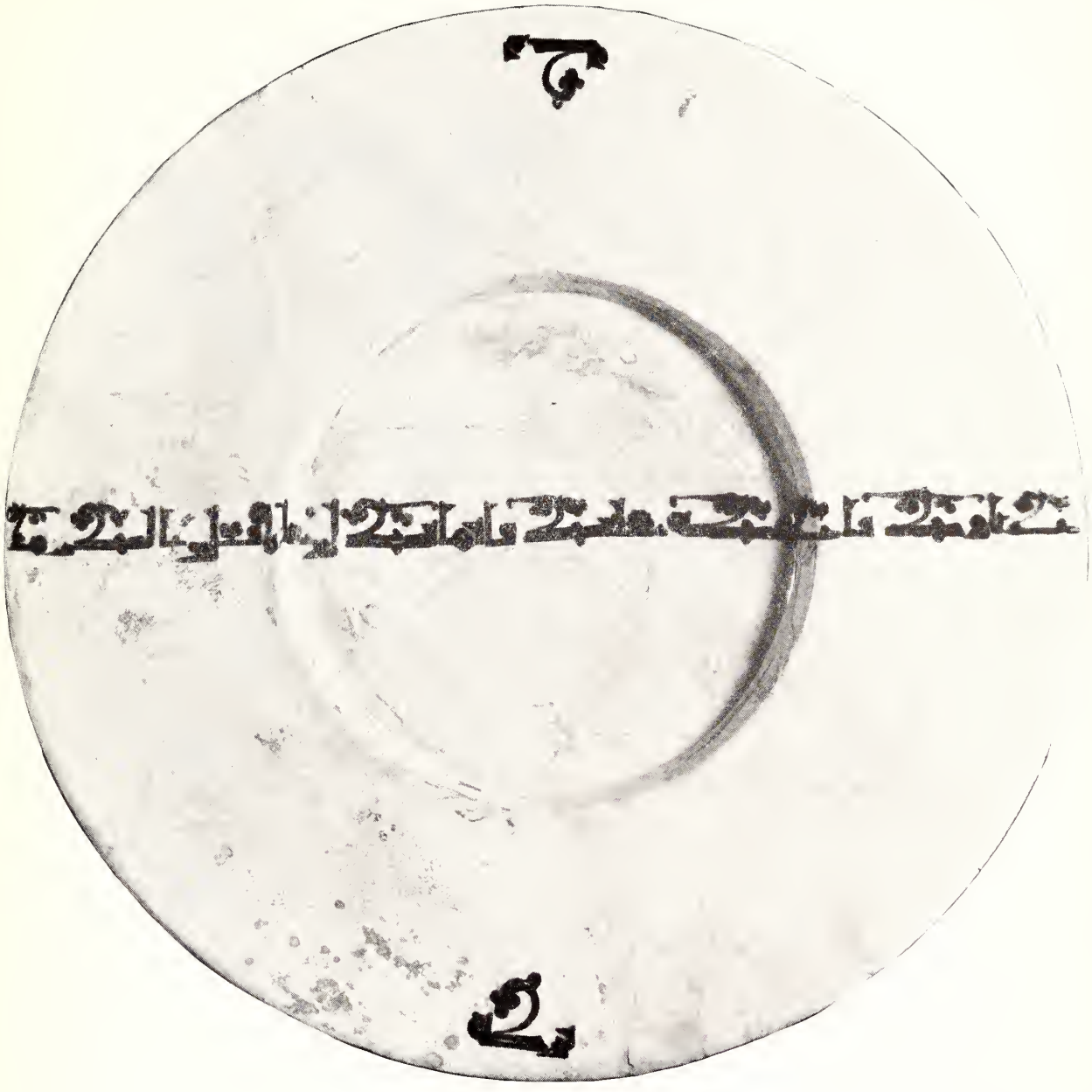


Figure 9. Platter painted with black and red slips on white. "Afrasiyab ware," found in Nishapur. Transoxania or Eastern Iran, 10th century. D. $16\frac{7}{8}$ in. (54.16)

Figure 10. Plate with yellow golden luster painting. Egypt, 11th/12th century. D. 15⅛ in. (41.12)

Figure 11. Shallow bowl with yellow golden luster painting. Egypt, 11th/12th century. D. 10 5/16 in. (46.30)

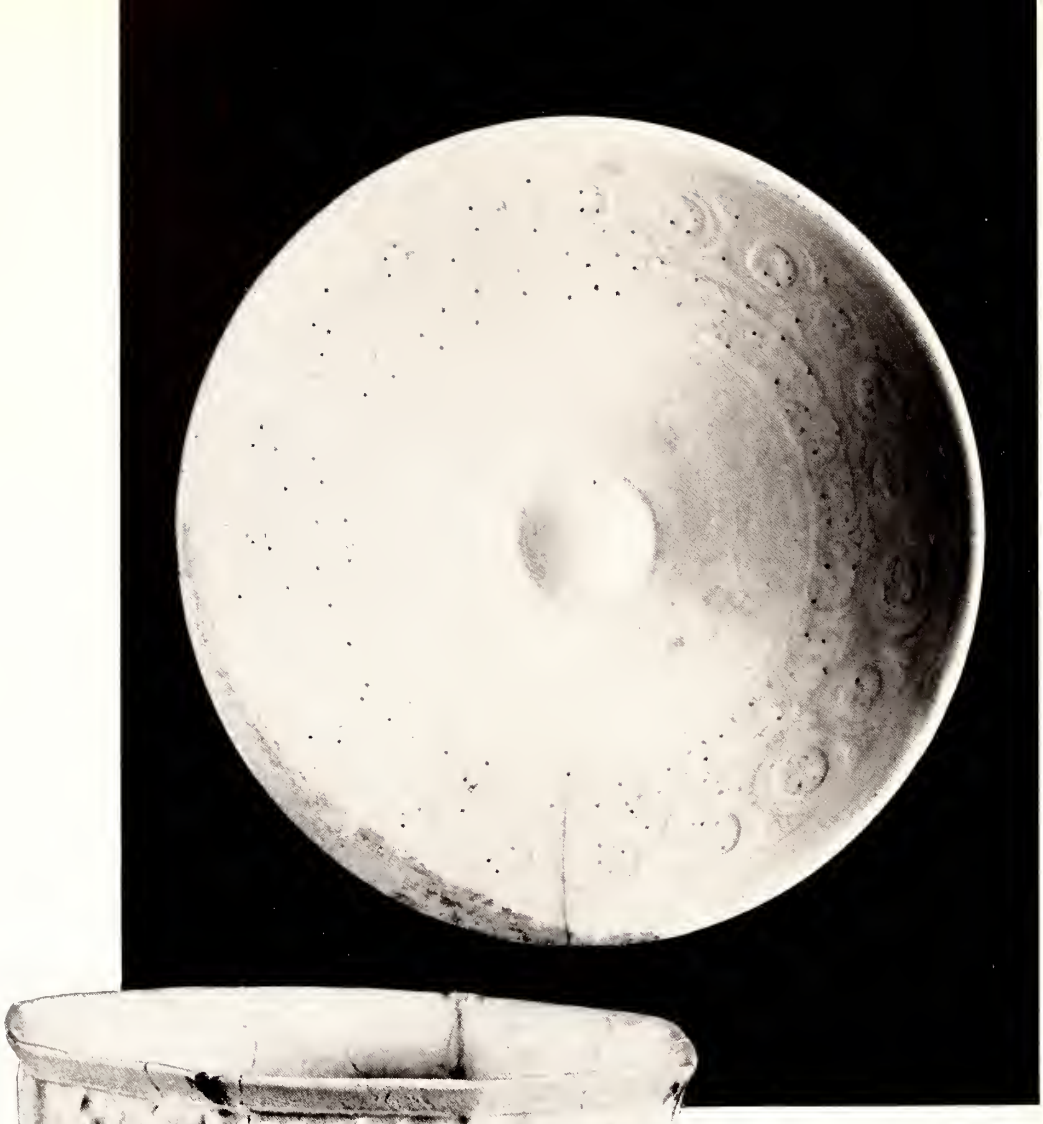


Figure 12. White-glazed carved bowl with artificial translucency. Iran, second half of the 12th century. D. 7¼ in. (56.2)

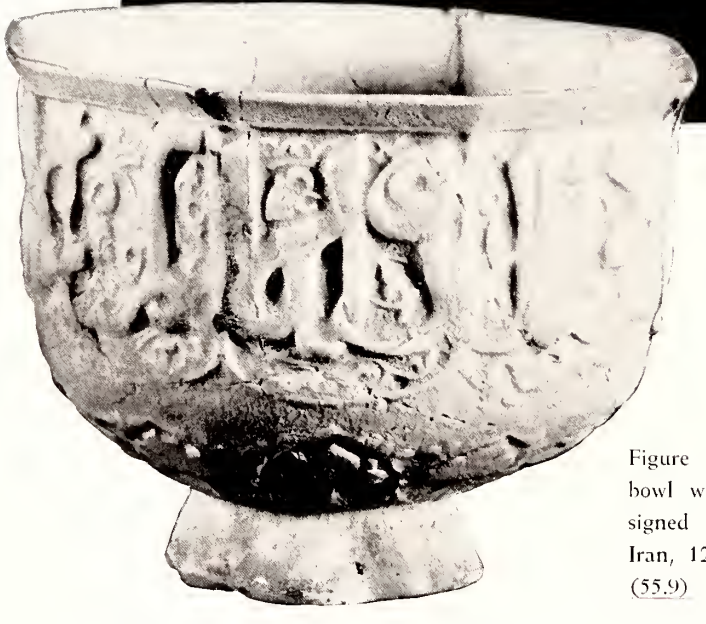


Figure 13. White-glazed deep bowl with dark blue splashes, signed by Hasan al-Qashani. Iran, 12th century. H. 4⅝ in. (55.9)

Figure 14. Six-spouted oil lamp with molded relief decoration. Syria (Raqqa), 12th/13th century. H. 3 in., W. $7\frac{3}{4}$ in. (31.7)

Figure 15. Green-glazed bowl with artificial translucency. Iran (Kashan), early 13th century. H. $3\frac{5}{16}$ in. (14.52)

Figure 16. Carved plate with dark blue, green, purple, and white glazes. Iran, early or middle of 12th century. D. 13½ in. (47.18)

Figure 17. Carved plate with dark blue, green, purple, and white glazes. Iran, early or middle of 12th century. D. 9⅛ in. (29.11)

Figure 18. Deep bowl with sgraffiato design in green, yellow, and purple on white. Iran, late 12th century. D. 10⅞ in. (44.49)

Figure 19. Shallow bowl with sgraffiato design in green, yellow, and purple on white. Syria, 12th/13th century. D. 11⅛ in. (42.13)

Figure 20. Flat-rimmed bowl with black painting under a green glaze. Syria (Raqqa), late 12th century. D. 10½ in. (47.8)

Figure 21. Pitcher with luster painting. Iran (Rayy), second half of the 12th century. H. 7 in. (09.370)

Figure 22. Large platter with luster painting. Iran (Rayy), middle of the 12th century. D. 17 in. (57.21)

Figure 23. Deep polychrome bowl painted black, green, dark red, dark blue, purple, flesh-color, and possibly gold, on white. Iran, late 12th century. D. 9 1/16 in. (38.12)

Figure 24. Large platter with deep brown luster painting by Sayyid Shams ad-Din al-Hasani, made for an Iranian amir. Iran (Kashan), 607 H./A.D. 1210. D. 13⅞ in. (41.11)

Figure 25. Deep bowl with luster painting. Iran (Kashan), second half of 13th century, D. $7\frac{7}{8}$ in. (40.22)

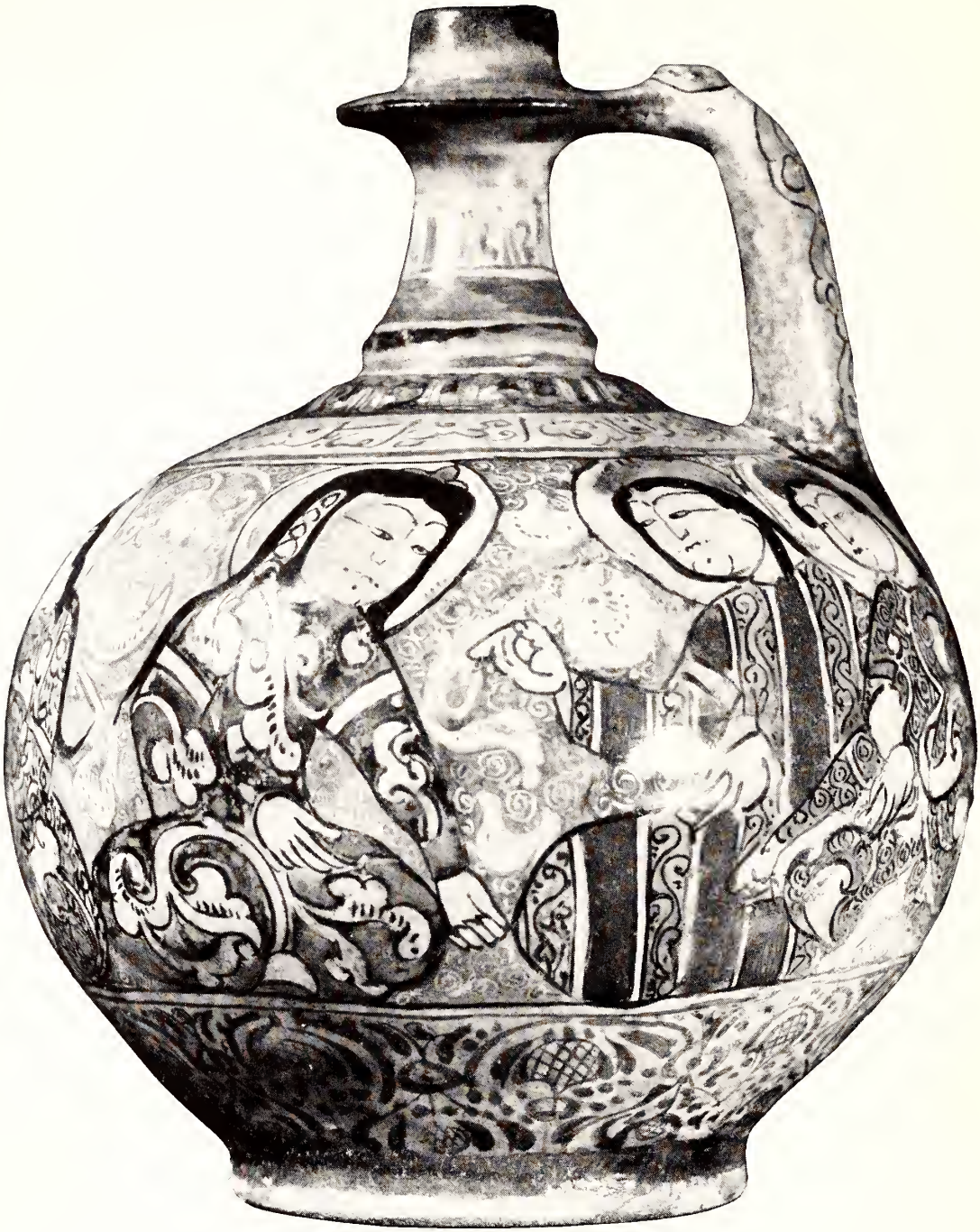


Figure 26. White-glazed jug painted dark blue and green in the glaze and black and luster on the glaze. Iran (Kashan), early 13th century. H. 7⅛ in. (29.9)

Figure 27. Double-shell ewer with black painting under a green glaze touched with blue spots. Found in Gurgan. Iran (Kashan), early 13th century. H. 11½ in. (49.19)

Figure 28. Deep polychrome bowl painted black, blue, turquoise, green, light and dark purple, orange, and brick red on white. Iran, early 13th century. D. $8\frac{1}{16}$ in. (38.13)

Figure 29. Inside of bowl shown in figure 28. (38.13)

Figure 30. Deep polychrome bowl painted black, red, green, dark blue, and gray on white. Iran, 12th/13th century. D. 8 in. (45.8)

Figure 31. Deep polychrome bowl painted black, blue, dark red, green, and possibly gold on white. Made for the Amir Abu Nasr Kermanshah. Iran, late 12th or early 13th century. D. 7 5/16 in. (27.3)

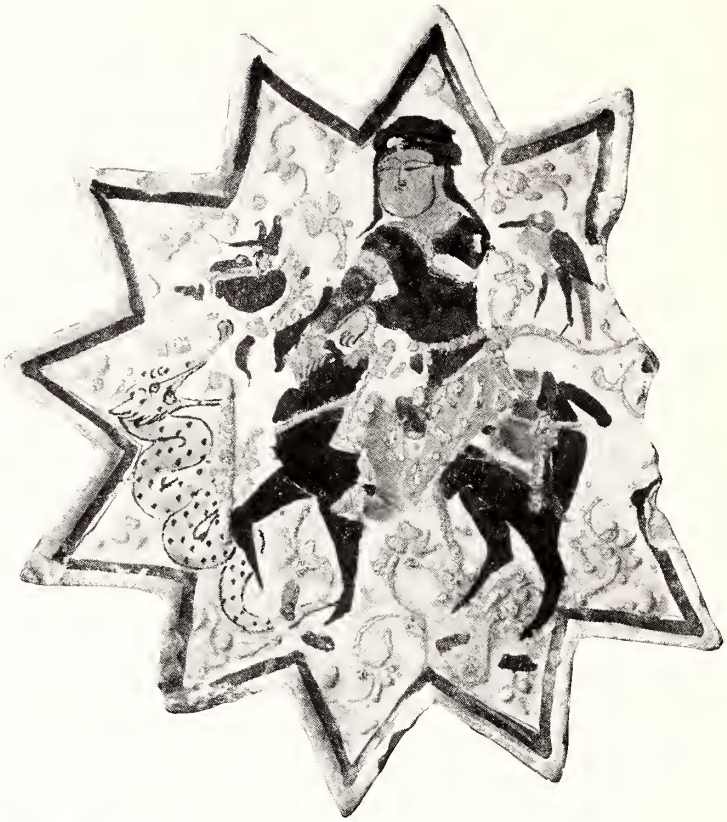


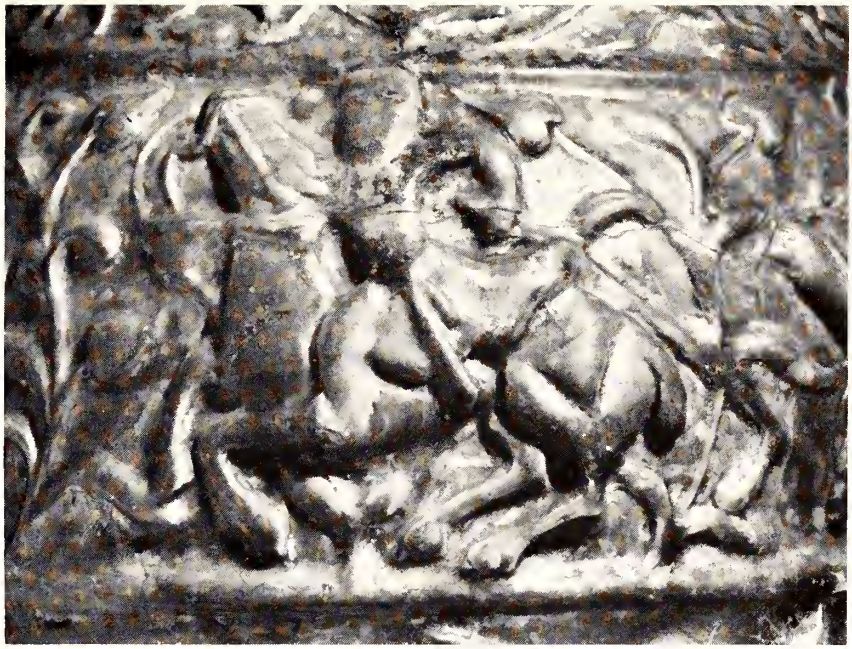
Figure 32. Twelve-pointed star showing "Gushtasp (or Bahram Gur) killing the dragon," and painted black, red, green, dark and light blue. Iran, late 12th century. D. $7\frac{1}{4}$ in. (11.319)

Figure 33. Inkpot with four reed-pen sockets, painted black, blue, light and olive green, and purple on white. Iran, early 13th century. H. $3\frac{1}{16}$ in. (34.18)

Figure 34. Deep polychrome bowl painted black, white, red, and dark blue on turquoise-green ground. Iran, middle of the 13th century. D. 8 1/16 in. (09.112)

Figure 35. Deep polychrome bowl painted black, light blue, deep red, green, tan, and possibly gold on white. By 'Ali ibn Yusuf. Iran, early 13th century. D. 8 1/8 in. (37.5)

Figure 36. High jar, dark blue glaze over white, red overglaze painting, and once possibly gilded. Iran, 13th century. H. 25¾ in. (28.1)



Figures 37-39. Details of the relief decoration on the jar shown in figure 36. (28.1)

Figure 40. Deep, wide-rimmed bowl painted in black and raised white on gray slip. Iran (Sultanabad region), early 14th century. D. 10⅝ in. (47.9)

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